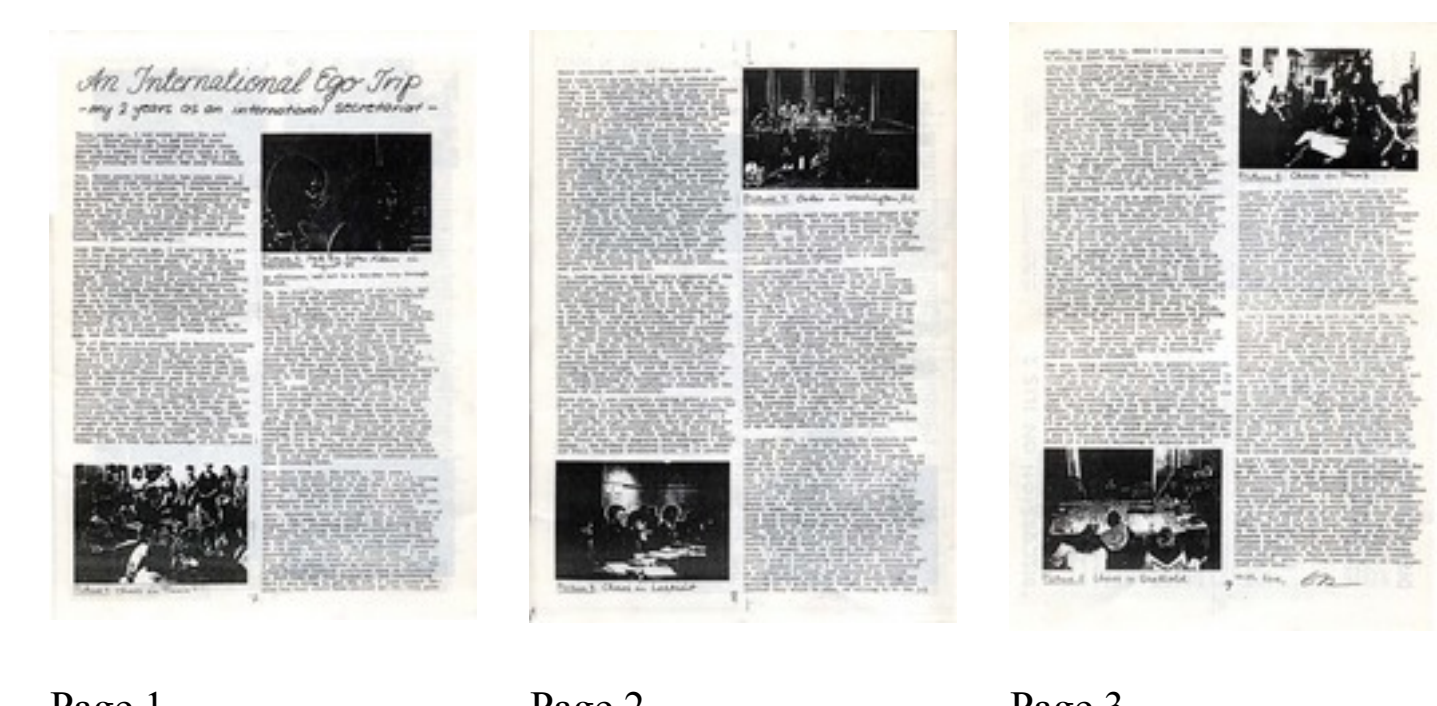


An international ego trip

- my 2 years as an international secretariat -

by Eva

These page images are scanned from a typewritten photocopied ILIS (International Lesbian Information Secretariat) Newsletter. OCRed version can be found below. Misspelled words are intentionally left as they were written.



Three years ago, I had never heard the word "ILIS". Three years ago I had hardly been further than Stockholm (having been sent over there by a woman I lived with once upon a time. She obviously made a weekend of it, while I was timidly staring at the exotic far away Stockholm life.)

Yes, three years later I feel ten years older. I have attended nine international conferences and been in quite a lot of places. I have been sitting at my typewriter and producing ten international newsletters. This is the last and eleventh of them. In fact, I feel like a warning example. This in my story of those years. I'm writing this 12 hours before this is duplicated and mailed, fully aware that somebody would no doubt want to read a political statement, an international proposal of lasting value, or (goddess bless me!) an analysis. Instead, I just wanted to say...

Less than three years ago, I was sitting in a pub with two gay male activist friends. I was an activist myself. In those days, I was editing the national gay bimonthly magazine, and was supposed to be studying theoretical physics, among other things. Well, mostly I was an activist. I recently made an inquiry into Finnish female scientists, and found out among other things that they tend to turn to a husband when their scientific surroundings are too cold and unsupportive. Having no such person to turn to, and finding women nervous with my male occupations, I naturally needed a supportive hobby of my own and turned to gay rights movement. So, it was perfectly natural for me to sit in a pub and discuss clever things with fellow men, and feel like somebody.

One of those men had attended the Barcelona meeting of the IGA (International Gay Association in case you did not already know). That was the place where a lot of women met and began planning ILIS. Moreover, the first ILIS conference had just been held in Amsterdam. There it was decided that ILIS would become an autonomous part of the IGA. Of all this, I knew just what stood in the conference preparation papers for the IGA conference in Turin Easter 1981. Well. We were talking about these matters, rather vaguely, Jouko (the man who was in Barcelona) began telling me that of course, SETA could perfectly well send me to Turin. Me? Turin? Certainly the thought was very exciting. once the thought had been expressed, things moved fast. And I even got some money for Attending the ILIS, conference, taking place in Turin prior to the IGA thing. I had a very vague knowledge of ILIS, packed my suitcase, and set to a two-way trip through Europe.

Oh, the first big conference of one's life, and how exciting and wonderful it seems! Certainly all about the ILIS conference in Turin was chaotic and messy and so on. But for a little innocent foreigner, it was just mostly a big fun, although I certainly had a communication problem, being deaf, and what with nobody accustomed to the fact - yet. So, all Italians, some hundred and more of them riotously went on and dissociated ILIS from the IGA and confused all the plans of the Dutch women who had the most hand in coordinating all this and that. Yes, it was a shock that the Dutch maybe never got over. But I, unaware of these great passions, just floated around. Even moving on from the ramshackle women's house to the luxurious hotel (swimming pools and so on), where the IGA happening took place, did not shake me. Of course not - it was just a new exotic experience, and of course, I was all too accustomed to seeing men all over the place. Not so for the other women, who were in a bad state indeed, quarrelling among themselves and with the men. Being interpreted very little of what was going on, I just watched the odd middle European passions aflame. This went on until one evening, one Dutch woman sat down and wrote all about it for me. Yes, quite interesting things, and just try to imagine my pride upon being told all those painful complications. I certainly felt like an old hand at international lesbian politics when returning home.

From that time on, the Dutch - they seem a mysterious natural force to me, and I'm not trying to explain to myself or to you why I call them just the Dutch and expect that to illuminate their nature - the Dutch were suddenly both the ILIS secretariat and the IGA women's secretariat in one, and felt no doubt a bit too much of a focus. Well, whatever their feelings were, at least one of them - the same one as above - sat in Stockholm in August 1981, attending another IGA meeting there, and busily selling the ILIS secretariat to those present. While the others were just squirming, I, on the contrary, felt like a young tigress jumping at its prey. Wonderful - an international lesbian secretariat - the whole world wide open - I was full of the worst kind of ambitions indeed. And so I said, or rather, wrote my starry-eyed "yes". Two other Finnish lesbian activists were in Stockholm at that time and they backed me, but considering that I was dying to get the job, I just cannot imagine how they could have stopped me. So, they gave their reassuring assent, and things moved on.

Back home with my new toy, I and the others soon had a bank account and other nice bureaucratic things, and began getting mail. Next new year would bring a new conference with it, but there was no need to worry about that, as the nice Dutch were taking hand of the registrations and so on. Meanwhile, I soon 1. found myself editing a book 2. had a disastrous relationship 3. found myself tired and stupid with the magazine I was editing 4. was stuck with my studies 5. was producing, with the beginner's clumsiness, the first ILIS newsletter from Finland. And when the Dutch began sending messages to Finland, asking about discussion papers for the conference, I had already escaped to central Europe, leaving Big Sister Amsterdam to write those (in my opinion rather superfluous) papers during the Xmas holidays, maybe energetically cursing at me while stuffing a new sheet to the typewriter. When I, after 10 days in Germany (my first contact with foreign civilization!) I found soon that some people seemed to have little top meetings without me, as I was so eminently unwilling (unable?) to tackle the typical Secretariat tasks. One of the Dutch just "happened" to mention this to me. Predictably, I marched straight away to face the top bureaucracy, angrily demanding an explanation. From that minute on I was grimly determined to show (yes, to show that I could do my job. Afterwards, I have heard jokes that I was efficiently cured during that conference from the odd German influences I seemed to have absorbed prior to it. Oh, it is so much simpler. I was already sick with stupid ambition, and quite incurable at that.

Yes, ladies, that is what I really remember of the Lichtaart conference. Not the big fight on the lesbian year (which Interpot, i.e. the Dutch, finally lost much later), and not the Eliane Morissens hunger strike, and not too much else, either. I only remembered that I had to excel in some way to stop the Dutch from sitting and talking about my bad work. A very sad attitude indeed. And I had my hands full with my self-defined task. I spent what seemed years typing the Lichtaart conference report, and producing the newsletters. In Easter 1982, there was the IGA Strasbourg meeting, and next July, the IGA annual conference in Washington. Of those I remember mainly my incessant fighting with the Big Sister Amsterdam, personified in a powerful, charming and irritating person indeed. During these meetings, I and the men that were co-attending them with me, succeeded in securing an IGA annual meeting to Helsinki (it is due next July right here), as a conference evidently is the centre of all earthly activity.

Those days, I was certainly working under a strain. Not only was I toiling under the ILIS workload, but I was still editing the magazine mentioned above, and feeling it to be too much. Not only that - I was under the right impression that my editing was looked upon as disastrously bad. So I did a rash thing and gave it up, before anything worse happened. Since then, the magazine has undergone a total change - the former editorial policies (i.e. mine) - are still very much shuddered upon. It is certain that the quality went vague under the weight of my other occupations, but I also disagreed (and disagree) with those criticizing the politics of "my" magazine. So, I was sick and tired of being evaluated, and that because my hunger for positive evaluation. It was really childish of me, to go around, flaunting my general more-or-less nonconformist policies, and imagining that I could be approved of because of them.

Now someone might ask, what about the other Finnish lesbians? At the same time as I was trying to find breathing room in my own personal maze of conflicting pursuits, they were very sensibly doing their own thing. Yet, they were working to start a real Finnish lesbian movement, choosing not to spread their strengths all around them like me. After all, this ILIS job was of my own private egocentric choice, not theirs, so it was only predictable that I found myself sitting through a night beside a never-resting photocopier, watching the 3000th sheet of paper crawl out, and sitting quietly in a corner hardly breathing, when someone threw a stone through the glass outer door at three o'clock in the morning. I was certainly able to produce the newsletter all alone - and desperately alone with that glorious job indeed! Finally, I was putting days, weeks, months of my time to it - until it became working with a guilty conscience instead of a labour of love. And nobody seemed to notice here in Finland that I was doing such a thing. In the end, when asked by acquaintances about what I was doing nowadays, I either said "nothing" or "doing the ILIS stuff around the clock". The latter answer was usually met with a blank stare, so I stopped answering at all. I had become a prisoner of my own huge ambition in just one year.

In August 1982, I certainly met the absolute rock bottom in the form of the Sheffield conference. Actually the conference was to be in Paris, but then the organizers just decided not to organize it and didn't even bother to tell me about it. I heard about the fact from the Dutch (whom else?). So, I had to do something. Through a series of bad motives (e.g., would I be able to attend it so that I could perform my competency act of producing a report?) the conference finally happened in Sheffield with a minimum of participants, among whom there was a marvellously indignant Dutch (of course Dutch) woman, who told me straight away about her pain upon seeing how uncaring people destroy the work done during many years by people who have been dedicated to it from the very beginning of It All. Well, this was just one more Dutch nail in the coffin where my self respect had been waiting its burial from the moment I met the first Dutch lesbian, it seemed. Let us forget the Sheffield conference - I was departing from Helsinki for 4 full months with a stipendium and just too anxious to get a well needed rest. So I typed the next newsletter as quickly as I could, and entrusted my fellow Finnish lesbians with the task of duplicating and mailing it. I gave little thought to the question whether they would be able, or willing to do the job right. They just had to, while I was crawling away to sleep my sweet sleep.

After two months away from Finland, I had realized that life could not go on like this. So I at last wrote to Finland and asked the others to publish the fact that "we" are giving the Secretariat up in Paris. This was never published, because those others had made a financial miscalculation and lost all ILIS funds, finally letting the ILIS mail to grow into a big unopened heap. Luckily, the Paris conference was organized by very independent and competent people indeed. But just imagine my horror when returning to Finland and finding myself, not free at last, but having once again done bad work (by inaction). So, I plunged into the Paris conference, prepared to pay for my sins with hard work Around the clock, hating every guilty minute of it. After the Paris conference, I spent a whole month entirely for putting every thing "right again", producing a report, and a newsletter - all this instead of tackling my own personal challenges (out of job, penniless, sad & sorry, and a kilometer high pile of other commitments gathering a dust of two years on them).

So things began to walk on again. First, I sensibly announced that the Secretariat will be given up next Easter. Later on, less sensibly, but quite rightly, I saw that the only way out was indeed to "get rid of" the secretariat immediately, for my own and everybody else's good, too. During that time, my Dutch complexes culminated in a dispute over the dates of the upcoming Amsterdam action meeting. To cut that rather exasperating story short, I disagreed with them on the matter all along, and wanted to discuss it with them, while they put their foot down by telling me that it is a matter of their choice, since it is their meeting, and I had better stop arguing. A total silence resulted - in fact, I still cannot understand why my letters to Amsterdam, written in August and in September, were never answered. Yes - I haven't heard a word from Holland in three months when I'm writing this, except for the time when I telephoned (with an interpreter) to one of the Dutch, who, when told that I was angry because of getting no response, that she did not understand why I kept arguing as the dates were settled. Even before that, I had mailed a letter to a number of groups, asking somebody, anybody to take my loathsome job over. And very rightly, a group of Norwegian women made me very happy by accepting an almost immediate transfer.

One more thing contributed to the general confusion. You might have wondered, how I was able to wander around so easily, from Helsinki to Washington and to Paris and so on. Well, it all came from belonging to an organisation able and willing to pay for the travels of one of its super-activists. And so it did (and I'm thankful even if ambivalent) until last July. While sitting at the IGA annual meeting in Vienna, the news came that the SETA disco (source of some 90% of SETA incomes) had been closed because of an article in an evening newspaper, informing its readers that that was where gays got their AIDS). So, I saw it clearly: no Amsterdam action meeting for me short of a miracle happening (a miracle did not happen) - so I was seemingly freed once and for all from my endless circle of travelling from conference to conference to deal with the Dutch. Indeed, I seemed to lose all my inhibitions about it at once. It seemed that those magnanimous projects planned by Amsterdam (lesbian year, tribunals...) were doomed to become not driving forces but objects of consuming dispute. I asked myself: am I really prepared to work for or against bringing lesbian issues to an UN women's conference? And I told myself that no. I also saw that I had never possessed an active interest in these issues at all, which had made it dangerously easy to print everything so nicely and unpartially in the newsletter ... Had the International Lesbian Information Secretariat (i.e. me) a stand of her own at all? Or was it just sheer egotripping over endless typewritten pages? - And was it worth it to spend half of your time worrying about the financial side of your participation in the next conference? Certainly not!

I don't think that I am just so bad as the above flow of woe makes one to conclude. Far from it. In fact, I strongly suspect that there are others, lots of them, struggling under related agonies, buried under polite political rhetoric and sweet sentences. I think that all of us are honest and dedicated, but that exactly by being unaware of the unfamiliar, alluring paths of power, we might choose to follow them. "A bunch of crazy dykes fighting over power issues without naming them," wrote a friend on an ILIS matter. And warned me not to quote her - which I am doing anyway, because she is so damn right. We all have felt once that the world lies there right before us, full of joy and possibilities and power. We might rush for them, then stumble over... That happened to me, but I am not really sorry. You might think that this is a silly egocentric exhibition, not the right thing for the newsletter of such a serious organisation as ILIS. I felt so too, and wrote this anyway, as my last word in the newsletter made with my own hands, not accepted for printing by someone else with that decision power over me. That is what all this lesbian publishing is really about...!

I don't regret these two-three years. Turning to things I really find to be of practical interest for me that I want to work on - the power inherent in hard sciences, and the patterns of male/female self-identification of women working in or out of those, for example, a most fascinating subject for a lesbian theoretical physicist - I find that my adventures with ILIS haven't been in vain. Having a bittersweet taste of that ambiguous lesbian power in the corner of my mouth reminds me of not talking about power so lightly. For it is also here among us, not only over there. And last but not least, continuing a thought by the astronomer Margaret Burbidge on whether other planets in the Universe ever survived their nuclear weapons ages, I really wonder what happens in the lesbian movements of the planets of those faraway stars and galaxies. Maybe somewhere there, another secretariat sits, Putting her thoughts on the paper just like this ...

With love, Eva